

BUSINESS

Amateur Electronic Supply signs off



Paul Shipes (left) purchases a new amateur radio from 49-year employee Paul Szczerbinski at Amateur Electronic Supply on Tuesday. Credit: Mark Hoffman



Amateur Electronic Supply is closing this month, but Ham Radio Outlet plans to open a store in the building sometime in late August. - Mark Hoffman



Old license plates customized with customer's call signs hang on the wall at Amateur Electronic Supply, 5710 W. Good Hope Road. AES is closing its doors on July 27 after almost

By *Meg Jones* of the Journal Sentinel

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Among ham radio operators, it's known as the candy store.

Amateur Electronic Supply sells radios, antennas and equipment that help hams connect with other hams throughout the world. It opened in Milwaukee in the late 1950s, attracted amateur radio enthusiasts from throughout the Midwest and eventually spawned stores in Cleveland, Orlando, Fla., and Las Vegas.

Ham radio clubs meet at the store at 5710 W. Good Hope Road in Milwaukee, aspiring ham radio operators take their FCC licensing tests there and enthusiasts stop in to pick up a part or

six decades in business. -
Mark Hoffman

carpool from Chicago or Dubuque, Iowa, to check out the latest radios. Dozens of license plates sporting ham radio call signs sent by customers hang on the walls.

Now AES is closing its doors after almost six decades in business, and the stunned ham radio community is reeling.

"It's certainly a blow to the local amateur radio community. Not everybody has a local store they can go to," said Dave DeFebo, historian of the Milwaukee Radio Amateurs' Club which has 100 members.

"But probably one of the things that did them in is that a lot of people will use the internet and find the best price, especially with the more expensive things, and people get crazy about paying sales tax," said DeFebo, whose call sign is WB9BWP.

At one time, AES was the largest amateur radio supply company in the U.S. Now, it's second behind Ham Radio Outlet. When AES owner Phil Majerus earlier this month announced his decision to shutter the business, Ham Radio Outlet agreed to hire some AES staff members and open an outlet in Milwaukee in the AES facility.

So when the AES store closes July 27, it will be gutted and turned into a Ham Radio Outlet.

"I'm excited hams will still have a place. They can still come here on a Saturday afternoon if they need a connector to complete their antenna project," said AES national sales manager Tom Pachner, who runs the Milwaukee store. "People were panicked when they heard we were closing."

The new Ham Radio Outlet will open in late August — no specific date has been set — and feature a new interior with more of an interactive experience. Instead of equipment behind counters, all radios will be hooked up and operational so customers can try them, Pachner said.

The business was started by Terry Serman, a Fond du Lac teenager and electronics enthusiast whose father owned a radio store. Serman, who died in 1999, opened a shop in Milwaukee in 1957. At swap meets, called ham fests, Serman collected contact information of fellow enthusiasts and

sent out catalogs. Soon amateur radio operators began flocking to the store, which became a hub for Milwaukee's ham radio community — a group that will celebrate its centennial next year.

"Fifty-nine years of business that started in Wisconsin is hard to see go. They were the leader in sales for amateur radio equipment for quite a few years, and they have had a nationwide impact," said David Schank, Milwaukee Radio Amateurs' Club president whose call sign is KA9WXN. "On Facebook right now, the (comments) you're seeing is a lot of regret. People are sad to see it go."

Schank noted that the number of ham radio operators in the U.S. — roughly 736,000 — is at an all-time high, according to the American Radio Relay League, the national organization of U.S. amateur radio. That's due in part to easier testing requirements to obtain an FCC license for ham radio operators.

"Dropping Morse code was huge," said Pachner, because folks no longer are required to translate a minimum of five words per minute in Morse code.

Pachner thinks the growth in ham radio is also based on a growing passion for community service following the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks when amateur radio operators were able to communicate and help coordinate emergency response while it was difficult to make cellphone calls. Often the first reports of disasters, such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, are reported by ham radio operators.

The cost to get started in the hobby can range from a couple hundred dollars for used equipment to thousands, with the average price of a new radio around \$1,000, said DeFebo.

There have been rumors within the local ham community about the No. 1 retailer moving in to Milwaukee, and Schank was happy to hear Ham Radio Outlet will take over the AES store so amateur radio enthusiasts will still have a place to go to buy equipment and gather for meetings and license tests.

A few years after opening in Milwaukee, AES began selling equipment via mail order, publishing catalogs and offering used radios for sale in its store for people starting out in the hobby.

Mirroring the seismic change in online retail throughout the world, it morphed into selling its wares online and eventually stopped printing catalogs. Store shelves loaded with used radios and parts disappeared as more people migrated to eBay and other online forums to get rid of used gear.

But the shop remained relevant as a brick-and-mortar place for ham radio enthusiasts to test new radios and equipment before buying. Its annual spring open house drew 1,200 people in its heyday several years ago. The last open house held in April drew more than 600 ham radio enthusiasts, said Pachner, whose call sign is W9TJP.

Milwaukee club member Dan Workenaour, call sign N9ASA, said ordering radios and equipment online is much different from testing them in advance. He read a glowing online review of a radio but when he checked out the model at AES he didn't like the feel of the radio's controls and ultimately didn't buy it.

"Not having the ability to play with the equipment means you really have to scrutinize online literature and reviews," Workenaour wrote in an email.



About Meg Jones

Meg Jones is a general assignment reporter who specializes in military and veterans issues. Meg was part of a team that was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2003, and is the author of "[World War II Milwaukee](#)."

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